

Still Life with Lilac and Pine (April 2015)

I didn't hear the branches snap and fall. Eleanor says she did. She says she saw through that small rectangle of window at the top of her front door, one minute she was noticing the branches and how the ice looked on the pine needles, sparkling in the streetlight, and the next she heard a loud crack and they were gone.

I had checked before I went to bed last night and everything was fine. I get up this morning and look out the window from my living room, out at my front yard and now I see two huge pine branches splintered and on the ground. They landed on my lilac bush and took down some wires. There are branches in Eleanor's driveway and on top of the back of her car. Great, I think. What's that going to be, at least five hundred if that's what her car insurance deductible is or my homeowners. Or probably the two insurance companies will argue over whose responsibility it is or just call it an act of God. Probably at least a grand. It's only six in the morning and I see the branches on Eleanor's car and know I have to get out there to clear them away in case she has to go someplace but I hope she can wait.

I need coffee. I find my phone in my purse and check the forecast.

It's about seven thirty by the time I go down to the basement and dig out my boots and wool cap and these navy blue insulated coveralls that I've had for about twenty years. I take the garage door key from the hook and think, It's probably going to be frozen shut and I'm getting all bundled up here for nothing. I get out there and the door slides right up. I pull my long-handled clippers and my hand saw from a shelf and head over to the tree to see what's what. I think, I should buy a condo so I don't have to do this shit anymore. I wave to Lou, two doors down, as he walks gingerly on the sidewalk to his truck. He's wearing his hat with the earflaps down and below the hem of his parka I can see his post office pants, gray wool with that stripe down the side.

Days like these make me glad I work at home. I think, I must look a sight out here in my Walls Zero-Zones but what do I care. They're warm and besides, my neighbors should be used to it by now. My breath turns white in the damp gray air and the ground crunches as I walk to Eleanor's car. I take a look and there's no damage. Most of what fell only grazed the side fender and a thick film of ice that had formed on it had protected it from being scratched.

For a second, I wonder what's going to happen if I touch the branches, which are all basically on top of the wires, and I can't remember if electricity travels through wood. I think it doesn't and that's why electricians use wooden ladders and wear sneakers with rubber soles. I'm pretty sure my boots have rubber soles. I'm pretty sure they're phone wires though and not the electric line. They've been pulled away from the house where they were anchored to the eave but are still connected to the metal box on the side and to the telephone pole, which explains why I still have Internet service. I'll have to call the phone company later.

Without thinking I grab one of the branches and then realize it and figure, I guess I was right, not the electric wires. But I was pretty sure anyway. I start snipping the branches off the back of the car with my clippers and throwing them in a pile under the tree. The temperature has risen just above freezing; just enough for a few rain drops to drip down through the tree above me but not enough to really melt anything yet. It's not brutally cold like it has been all winter and there's no wind. It's just cold enough to feel good in my lungs.

After about twenty minutes Eleanor opens her front door and stands with one hand on the jamb, the other on the open screen door. She's been in the house next to me for going on a year, she and her daughter Debra. She's seventy-seven and you'd never know it. She reminds me of my Aunt Abby, a tiny bundle of energy, always on the go. Eleanor still works part time as a home aid and laughs when she says she takes care of old people as if she's not old herself. She's in her nightgown and slippers. She hasn't combed her hair yet.

She says, "Gail! I heard that fall last night!"

"Can you believe it?" I say. We talk across the driveway and our voices echo down the street, crisp in the early morning. "It must have happened after I went to bed," I say. "The same thing happened across the way." I nod towards the corner.

"Bill's tree?" Eleanor says.

I say, "Yeah. The branches are still half in the street."

She says, "Oh. I'm surprised. He's usually the first one out there."

I point to the back of her car. "I don't see any damage here, Eleanor," I say. "But you check it and let me know."

"I heard them fall," she says. "It was around eleven o'clock. I always sit in the same spot when I watch TV and I can see through that small rectangle of window at the top of my front door. One minute I was noticing the branches and how the ice looked on the pine needles, sparkling in the streetlight, and the next I heard a loud crack and they were gone." She says, "It's a good thing it didn't hit your house."

"Yeah," I say. "Well you check your car and let me know."

"I can always tell if it's windy from where I sit watching those pine branches through my door," she says. "I used to have about fourteen trees up where I used to live in Pennsylvania. All pine trees like this one. They used to break all the time like this. They're a pain in the neck. After my husband died."

I say, "I'm going to have to do something about it I guess." I look up and think, I really like this tree, though. It shades my house in the summer and, years ago when I first moved here, I planted ivy at the base of it and now the ivy has grown up and all around the trunk.

"This weather," Eleanor says. "I wish we were done with it by now. I have to go to a funeral on Friday. I'm going to make my daughter-in-law take me."

"I think it's supposed to get warmer next week," I say.

"I hope so," she says. "Okay honey."

"Okay Eleanor," I say. She goes back inside and closes the door.

I thought at first that I would only clear the mess off of Eleanor's car and out of her driveway but now that I'm here I think, I might as well finish. We're supposed to get another storm the next day so I'd probably better clear everything off of those wires. I figure it'll take a couple of hours and I walk to the garage to get my rake. Not the leaf rake, the other one; the one with the metal base and the metal prongs. I walk back and start raking up what's left on Eleanor's driveway. The ice had formed on the long pine needles. They look and sound like shards of glass as I rake them off the asphalt.

Debra is about my age. Eleanor told me about her when they first moved in, said she had always lived with her, that she had really bad diabetes and then Eleanor hinted at something else too. She said that Debra stayed in her room most of the time and didn't really do much; that she slept a lot. Because of the diabetes. I don't see Debra very often, only a couple of times last summer. She weighs about three hundred pounds and walks with her head down, slow. Sometimes she would be sitting on their screened-in porch when I was on my deck, or once, I was outside and she came out to their back yard and put food in the birdfeeder. It was one of those really still, bright, cloudless-sky days and she was wearing this yellow print housedress. I called, Hi. How are you? She said, You must think I'm crazy the way I talk to my cat sometimes. I said, No way. I used to have a cat. I said, I used to talk to my cat like that all the time. Then she waved and I waved and she went back inside.

I work on the fallen branches. I develop a system of cutting the smaller ones with the clippers, clearing from the top and the side, and throwing them up into the pile under the tree if they're light. If they're heavier I drag them. I work my way towards the wires underneath. It's like figuring out a jigsaw puzzle but in reverse or maybe a game of pick-up-sticks, choosing which ones to cut away to get to the others below. I clip and then use my saw for the thicker pieces. It's white pine so the wood is soft and I guess because of the cold it snaps easily. The lilac that's tangled up in the pine is harder to cut,

harder wood, and that surprises me. I cut and throw, cut and drag. I like the smell of the pine. The work has gotten my heart pumping.

Eleanor appears in the doorway again. She has her bathrobe on over her nightgown now. “Gail be careful of those wires,” she says.

I say, “I’m pretty sure they’re Verizon.” I take a breather.

“How ‘bout this weather,” Eleanor says. “And more coming tomorrow they’re saying. Do you think we’re going to get that much? Eight to ten inches they’re saying.”

I say, “They’ve been wrong most of this winter so maybe they’ll be wrong this time too,” but I think, They won’t be wrong this time.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with this funeral on Friday,” Eleanor says. “And then Debra has to get her knee operated on.”

“This week?” I say.

“No. In April. Next month,” she says. “But I don’t know what’s going to happen with that either. She’s already out of pain pills so I don’t know.” She says, “You’re sure those are the phone wires?”

I say, “Yeah. They’re fine.”